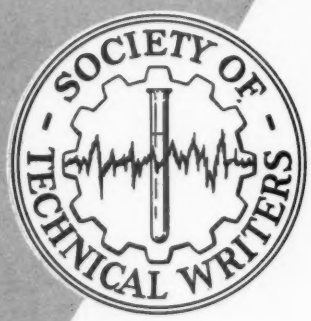
TECHNICAL WRITING REVIEW



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SIMPLICITY
in Technical Writing

By

Herbert E. Augustus

Technical Publications Writer

Chemical Corps Engineering Command

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Editor's Note: In the Summer Issue of the TECHNICAL WRITING REVIEW attention was called to a study by Prof. R. A. Sencer, of Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, which showed that most writing guides say very little about how to write. Advice on this subject can, of course, be found in various books and elsewhere, but the brief and simple suggestions made by the author in this article may nevertheless prove helpful to many technical writers.

Skill in technical writing is achieved only by diligent practice and application of the basic principles of composition and grammar. Every writer should have ready access to a good handbook on composition, textbook on grammar and a standard English dictionary for reference purposes.

STYLE

Technical writing differs widely in subject matter and scientific value. The manner of presentation will depend on the author's objective, and the reader for whom the communication of ideas is intended. The style of the technical communication is the result of precision in choice of words, attention to correct sentence structure, and smooth linking of sentence to sentence and paragraph to paragraph to form a continuous and consistent whole.

Since technical writing deals with questions and problems involving the mind rather than the emotions, it calls for a restrained, unemotional style. Written technical communications should be neither too informal nor too stiff and pompous. Except for informal reports or brief memoranda which may be written in the first person, technical writing style calls for the use of the third person or impersonal form of writing.

Repetition, when used judiciously, is an aid to understanding and remembering. A restatement of an idea in slightly different language at the close of a paragraph is effective. It serves as a transition to the next idea and gives the reader a "breather."

PARAGRAPHS

A good paragraph is a unit of writing and should consist of a topic sentence which tells the reader what is going to be said in the paragraph, and a summarizing sentence at the end of the paragraph to warn the reader that this is the end of the paragraph and to prepare him for the next topic or idea. Transition words or phrases should be used, when needed, to carry the mind of the reader smoothly from one topic or idea to the next.

Paragraphs should be written with the reader in mind. Subject matter and consideration for the reader

should determine the length of the paragraph. Paragraphs with short choppy sentences, primer style, tend to irritate the reader. A smooth paragraph, paced with both short and long sentences and appropriate transitional words or phrases, should be the aim of the writer.

The trend in modern technical writing is toward shorter paragraphs, using sub-paragraphs if necessary. Short paragraphs are easier to read and absorb. It is better to over-paragraph when writing than to under-paragraph.

SENTENCES

For the sake of the reader, vary the sentence structure. Excessive of any one type of sentence should be avoided. Too many successive simple sentences make for uninteresting writing; too much use of complex and compound sentences is a strain on the reader. Scrutinize all compound sentences and whenever possible change them to either complex sentences or simple sentences for more effective presentation.

LANGUAGE

The primary objective of technical communication is to transmit information from the mind of the author to the mind of the reader. The simplest language which will express an idea with precision and still maintain a mature style is most desirable.

Pompous language may be impressive, but it is difficult for the mind to absorb, and is less effective than simple language. Vagueness may be due to neglect on the part of the author to use the information he has, or failure to get the information he lacks.

Technical language has a definite place in technical writing, but can be overdone. In many instances, a simple word or phrase may be more effective than indiscriminate use of technical terminology or phraseology. Needless use of technical language characterizes the work of a beginner who is trying to be professional or make a pedantic display, rather than the work of a writer who is skilled in the art of technical communication.

The language of technical communication must be tailored as specifically as possible for the expected audience. Each word and phrase has a definite job to perform in the expression of ideas; some words and phrases are more effective than others. It is the responsibility of the author to the reader to use the language which will best convey his ideas to his audience.

COMPARATIVE WEIGHTS OF PAPER

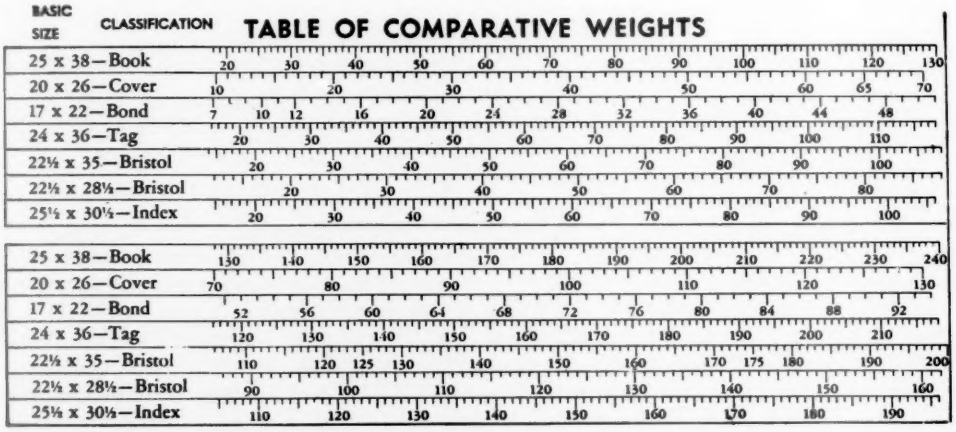
The weights of various papers are more or less a simple matter to one who deals with them daily. But they can prove a confusing and often difficult problem to the individual who is confronted with paper weights only on occasions.

A ream or 500 sheets is the weight standard from which all quantities of commercial papers are measured.

Papers vary in size. Each type of stock has a different basic size. When we speak of 70 pound book stock it means that 500 of the sheets in size 25 x 38 inches weigh 70 pounds.

When we refer to a 28# bond it means that 500 sheets in the basic size (17 x 22) weigh 28 pounds.

The purpose of the table shown below is to enable you to tell at a glance the comparable weights of different types of stock. A 70# book stock, a 38# cover stock and a 28# bond stock are all about the same weight and thickness.



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OPPORTUNITIES
for Technical Writers

By Bonnel H. Allen
Personnel Consultant
Chicago, Ill.

Industry is becoming aware that it takes a person with special training to do the type of writing that it requires. Until recently, industry expected the graduate engineer or scientist to do his own writing. These men, however, are not trained in putting their thoughts on paper and usually have had difficulty expressing themselves. For some types of industrial writing, industry has expected the service department to do the job. Here again, the people concerned have not been trained in using the written word and their writing is often at the comprehension level of the mechanic rather than the scientist or the engineer.

As a result of these two experiences, industry is beginning to realize that industrial writing is a profession by itself. It now realizes special training and background is required to be an industrial writer. As a result, the demand for industrial writers has increased considerably during the past few years and from all indications will increase even more in the future.

Abstract of a paper presented Oct. 3, 1956 before the Chicago Chapter.

SALARY RANGES

Salary scales I have encountered in the past year range from $5,000 to $15,000 per year. There are a few companies, however, which still try to start a beginner below $5,000 a year. In general, salaries compare very favorably with the rest of the engineering and scientific professions. Probably the bulk of the opportunities encountered have ranged from $6,500 to $10,000 a year and would include most of the people in this profession. There is one important point I wish to stress at this time. The higher up you go in the salary scale the more you are being paid for your ability to supervise, direct, or administer, and not for your technical know-how. This is true of most other groups, except the legal and medical professions.

SPECIFICATION WRITERS

There are many types of industrial writers covering many different phases of the work. Let us consider the Specification Writer as our first example. He must have a fair command of the English language and the ability to put his thoughts on paper. It is more important, however, that he have a very thorough knowledge of blueprints and drawings. His job is to take the quantities and the materials from the drawing, make his bill of materials, and then put these materials and quantities into sentences when writing his specification so that the builder will know how to construct the building or the manufacturer will know how to make the machine. A good command of English, the ability to put his thoughts on paper, and a good knowledge of blueprints are the main requirements for this type of writer.

REPORT WRITERS

Next, let us theorize about report writers. Fundamentally, there are two principal types. One type works with a research foundation or similar organization that deals primarily with research or development work. This writers' report is more in the nature of a progress

report of a highly technical development or project, either in progress or completed. These documents will often contain a number of mathematical formulas, graphs, and statistical tables and be written in highly technical language. This writer needs to be trained in some phase of engineering or science, have an exceptional command of technical language, and the ability to put highly theoretical information on paper. If he has more than a basic knowledge of mathematics it is helpful.

The other type of report writer is one who handles what I would call a finished report. This writer's job is to take the overall accomplishments of an organization and tell a complete story of what has been done. He may be writing for top management, for the stockholders, or possibly for tax purposes. He needs a good command of English, the ability to express himself on paper, some technical training, a knowledge of statistics, and some knowledge of charts and graphs. Some legal knowledge may be required for this function.

HANDBOOKS

Now, let us look at another type of industrial writer. This person writes civilian handbooks or customer handbooks for new appliances or gadgets. The objective of these pamphlets is to tell the customer as much about the product as possible so that it can be assembled and become operative without the help of a serviceman. This type of publication has to be written in easy flowing language that anyone can understand. The writer must have complete command of the language and the ability to write easily and simply so that the general public can understand the instructions. He must have some knowledge of graphic art techniques since many of these booklets will have schematic drawings, pictures, and even cartoons.

Another type of handbook writer deals with military handbooks. Among the two types encountered are those known as Tech Orders and the Operating Manual. Tech Orders are highly detailed technical explanations covering a piece of equipment such as a radar set, aircraft, or ordnance. The reports are primarily available to commissioned officers and technical sergeants, who in turn are supposed to be able to interpret them and from them tell the enlisted man what to do. The writer has to have a good technical background in the phase of activity to be covered. He must have an exceptional ability to express himself in writing and the skill to follow specification-type instructions.

A second type of military handbook writer prepares the document known as the Operating Manual. These manuals were developed for the enlisted man because quite often Tech Orders were too theoretical and too technical to be understood. These are now more or less instruction manuals telling the enlisted man how to repair or assemble a given piece of equipment in the shortest time possible. While they are very detailed, they differ from the Tech Order in the level and style of language used. These are intended to tell the mechanic what tool to use and how to use it. The person who writes these manuals has to have the ability to express himself in normal language and must have a very thorough knowledge of the mechanic's tools, gages, circuits, and related instruments. The writer's technical knowledge will probably be more of a shop or service nature.

PROCEDURES

Another type of writer found in industry today writes procedures. Procedures are a word picture of the overall flow of material or paper through an organization. Usually, the starting point for writing procedures is making a flow chart of the operation from beginning to end showing the various departments and stations. These are written to give all employees a word picture of what happens within the organization to a piece of material or operation. The person who writes procedures should have a good command of language, the ability to express himself easily, and a good background in industrial engineering plus a detailed knowledge of his own organization.

INDUSTRIAL OPERATING MANUALS

A sister manual to the Procedures Manual is known as the Industrial Operating Manual. This document starts from a flow chart of the Procedures Manual and is intended to tell each operator exactly what steps to perform in handling his own work. It is meant to train beginners so they will accomplish their work in the least amount of time and with the least amount of coaching. Many companies use these as standards and if an operator forgets part of the work or makes a mistake, the individual is referred to the Industrial Operating Manual. A person writing this type of manual must also have a detailed knowledge of his own organization. He should have the ability to write in a manner such that the beginner or new employee understands readily the instructions within the manual. He should have been exposed to methods training.

INDUSTRIAL TRAINING COURSES

Still another person in the industrial writing field is author of the industrial training course. Today, these courses are very popular and are increasing in popularity because industry believes that on-the-job training is important. Training courses may be written for sales, executive, or supervisory training, processing or many other parts of the industrial picture. Usually, the training syllabus is supposed to be more of an outline which tries to fit a number of subjects for the course in which the trainee is to be instructed into an overall time schedule. The course will list the materials, aids, faculty, equipment, and other pertinent information. The details are supposed to be left to the lecturer who writes his own presentation. These people, however,

are seldom trained writers and often the course writer will have to ghost write the detailed material and, therefore, may actually write the entire course. The writer handling this type of industrial writing should have a good command of English, a knowledge of educational methods, good working familiarity with visual and audio aids, an understanding of other usable training equipment, a background in personnel, some salesmanship, and enough of an analytical mind to determine the actual needs that the course is trying to satisfy.

INDUSTRIAL INDOCTRINATION MANUALS

Writers in industrial relations or personnel often prepare the Indoctrination Manual. These manuals are informative booklets aimed at making the new employee feel at home and a part of the company team as quickly as possible. They are given to all new employees upon hiring, whether the new man is to work in the shop or is a research scientist. They usually explain some of the policies of the company, certain working conditions, fringe benefits, rules and regulations, and other information of use to the new employee. They also try to sell the new employee on all of the advantages that particular company has to offer. The writer of such documents has to have an easy, flowing style and the ability to express himself freely and in a manner simple enough for comprehension at all levels. He must have some knowledge of journalism, familiarity with graphic art production, and training in personnel work. Experiences in psychology and in salesmanship are helpful.

HOUSE ORGANS

Another type of writer in the industrial relations field is the editor of the House Organ. There are many different types of House Organs, most of which are advertising or promotional pieces instead of true House Organs. Basically there is only one real House Organ. This is a newsy means of intraorganization communication based on exchanging ideas of management and of the worker so that both groups know what is going on within the organization. The writer and editor of these papers must be able to maintain a fairly neutral attitude, keeping the information to the middle of the road. If he leans too heavily to management's viewpoints, the worker will not be happy; too heavily toward the employee and management will not be happy.

One weakness of many House Organs is the tendency to lean more toward the scandal-sheet type of publication containing statements such as, "What foreman was seen with what blonde at what tavern?" Things like this in a House Organ can cause trouble, whereas a good House Organ is supposed to be a morale builder — not a trouble maker.

The editor of the House Organ has to have a detailed knowledge of graphic arts production, training in journalism, knowledge of personnel and psychology, the ability to separate news items from scandal, and considerable diplomacy.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETY WRITERS

Within the Professional Society we find several different types of industrial writers. One type is the individual who has made a study of a certain phase of the society activities or interests and writes an easy flowing paper or article because he thinks the members will be interested. Usually this person will not be trained in writing and his material requires considerable checking, rewriting, and editing to improve the sentence structure and readability for that particular society's membership.

The person editing these articles has to have a good command of English, knowledge of what is and what is not acceptable reading matter for the members, considerable diplomacy and tact so that changes can be made without offending the author, and sufficient technical knowledge to determine the authenticity of the material.

Another professional society writer, or perhaps we must define him as an editor, edits all material submitted for the regular publication of the society. This person must know his own society well enough to determine how much material can be used, the type of material, the length of articles printed, and the general format of the publications published by the society. The editor is well versed in the objectives of the society, the type of membership and the general thinking of such membership. He must have sufficient technical background to appreciate the overall scheme of society policies, a good working knowledge of journalism, a detailed knowledge of the graphic arts, and some psychology. A general knowledge of economics is helpful.

TECHNICAL EDITING

In addition to the types of professional society writers mentioned previously, one other type is commonly used by many societies. This person is highly trained technically in the particular phase of engineering or science of interest to the society. He will receive highly technical papers from people who have made an exhaustive study of one particular phase of the science. These papers are the result of one person's study and quite often the author knows more about the particular subject than anyone else in the world. They are often written in technical language well above the heads of most experts in that field. They will contain many mathematical formulas, graphs and charts, and very special terminology. Usually the society does not use these articles in their regular publication, but reserves them for special editions which are published once or twice a year or preprints the article and makes it available to members interested in that particular subject.

An editor for this type of material has to have an exhaustive command of English, be well versed in mathematics and statistics, know graphs and charts and methods to improve them, know reproduction techniques, be broad in his technical background, and tactful

so as not to offend the original author when making changes to the manuscript.

THE COMPANY ADVERTISING WRITER

In the field of promotional writing of a technical content we find the advertising writer within the company. This person will usually work in the advertising or sales department since most of his writings will be of a sales nature. He is trying to convince the public to buy more of the company's products through the power of the written word. Quite often this person will also handle the direct mail advertising pieces such as sales letters and promotional pieces. This writer has to have an easy flowing style, good command of English which can be adjusted to the type of customer he is trying to reach, adequate knowledge of the product he is trying to sell, training in salesmanship, some psychology, working familiarity with the graphic arts, and, in some cases, technical training in the particular product field.

THE ADVERTISING AGENCY WRITER

The industrial writer in the advertising agency usually has a very fine position. In many agencies there is but one technical writer and, there are seldom more than three of four in the largest agencies. Writers in this situation are respected and looked up to by the rest of the organization as experts and specialists. Anything of an industrial or technical nature that the agency encounters is turned over to the industrial writer who is supposed to be able to solve any such copy problem. The person in this type of position has to have an excellent technical background, specializing in one phase of engineering or science and possess a working knowledge of allied professional fields. He has to have full command of technical English, a knowledge of salesmanship, and a detailed knowledge of the graphic arts. He will be working with and advising several of the agency's top personnel while handling a variety of products.

COMMERCIAL PUBLICATIONS WRITERS

Technical writers for commercial publication houses will come the closest to actual reporting methods of anyone in the industrial writing field. This work requires a different type of person than the other writers we have discussed. This person attends the professional conferences, trade shows, and interviews within an industry to dig up the information for his story. He will conduct interviews, ask questions of many people, take pictures to illustrate a point, and otherwise get his information from as many sources as possible. He then must decide which material is usable in writing his story. His story must be good, for the circulation of his magazine depends directly upon the type of article it publishes. Circulation, in turn, affects the advertising rates for space that the publication sells and the amount of advertising that can be sold. Most publications make their money from the sale of advertising space and not from the subscriber's subscription payment. In such an arrangement the writer becomes a very important member of the organization since he directly affects the circulation. The writer in this position has to have a very fine background in some phase of engineering science and working knowledge of several allied branches of the profession. He has to have training in journalism, a broad command of English, and some knowledge of the graphic arts, and be tactful yet aggressive in selling himself to get his story.

TOOLS, TIPS AND LANGUAGE

Regardless of the type of industrial writing a person is going to follow, he will find typing and shorthand two useful tools to assist him in his work. Graphic art production techniques will be found valuable for most types of writing.

Several suggestions or rules will be found to be helpful to the industrial writer. First, determine your subject matter before starting to write so that you know WHAT you are going to write about. Second, determine the purpose for the article or report to be written so that you know WHY you are writing it.

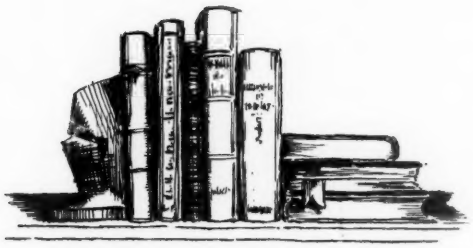
After collecting the raw material, pause long enough to determine the type of reading public you expect to reach. Are you writing for a group of highly trained PhD's, the general public, or a group of shop employees with limited education? After determining the group you wish to reach, try to aim your language and phraseology to fit that particular group. It is just as serious to write below the intelligence of an educated group of readers as it is to write over the heads of the uneducated or too technically for the general public.

HUMAN INTEREST

One of the foremost failings of the industrial writer is that he tends to forget the human interest in the work about which he writes. The writer becomes so engrossed in the subject that he overlooks the fact that *a human being must read his writing.* Unless the writer can inject something of human interest into the work, the reader will not finish reading the material and time, talent, and effort have been wasted in creating a half-read document.

In some highly technical articles it may be advisable at times to break the train of thought temporarily to inject something lighter into the heavy technology before returning to the technical language of the article. Sometimes a change of pace in your writing will maintain the human interest. At all times keep your reader in mind — you are writing for the benefit of knowledge of human beings.

The better you write, the higher the salary you will command, the greater prestige you will enjoy, and the more fully satisfied you will be in the technical writing profession.



BOOK REVIEW

TECHNICAL PUBLICATIONS: Their Purpose, Preparation and Production. By C. Baker, A.R.Ae.S. John Wiley & Sons, Inc., N. Y. 1955. *xiii* + 302 *pp. Illus.* $6.

Although technical writing as a full-time, specialized occupation has grown rapidly in the past fifteen years, it is hardly new. In 1911, Samuel Chandler Earle, then Professor of English at Tufts Engineering School, commented in the preface to his text on technical writing: "Of late a few schools have introduced tentative courses in technical writing, and a number of textbooks are being put upon the market. So far the efforts have resulted mainly in publications of three sorts: (1) specimens of technical writings, which show the finished product but do not indicate to the bewildered writer how he may produce the best results; (2) dissertations on correct English together with notes for the guidance of authors in the submission of manuscripts to publishers, which only add to the large number of valuable books already written on these subjects; (3) treatises on technical writing addressed, with a certain condescension', to engineers, but in reality based on a study of literary exposition. No one of these would seem to get down to underlying principles in a way which is general, yet definite and detailed enough to serve as a practical guide for the engineer." Until recently, Prof. Earle's complaint was probably still justified, but he would approve of Baker's book. In his preface, Baker states that "it is not a textbook on English grammar or commercial art, neither is it intended to claim the attention of technical book publishers or printing trades operatives; it is nothing more than a guide for the technician to the techniques of presenting information and producing it in the best — and cheapest — form." (Throughout the book Baker uses the word "technician" in its strict dictionary sense: one skilled in the technical details of a trade, profession, subject, or art). The author's statement of purpose is too modest. Technical writers, editors, and illustrators, and those in charge of Technical Publications Departments, should find this book not only useful and interesting, but a good example of an author who practices what he teaches. The book is divided into 10 chapters and includes 61 illustrations.

Chapter 1 is a discussion of the various forms of technical publicity: textbooks, technical journalism, articles, advertising, brochures, scientific papers, the use of models, and those technical publications with which the book is primarily concerned, namely, reports, service bulletins, instruction books, spare-parts lists and specifications. The subject of chapter 2 is the different types of readers and their needs. English style and grammar are the topics treated in chapter 3; Baker has this to say about the qualifications of a technical writer: "To be a success, a technical author must be first a technician and then a writer. Without a clear conception of the scientific problem to be discussed and a full grasp of the fundamental principles involved, no form of words, however skilfully chosen, can convey a realistic picture of the problem to a second party. But once the technical aspect has been grasped the author, by reason of the methodical training which he received as a technician, should be able to write down the salient features of the work, its operations, tests, and the conclusions in a logical order intelligible to the reader. Good stuff is read, badly written text may conceal incomplete or inaccurate material and, even if it does not, it may cast suspicion in the mind of the reader." Again, in chapter 8, he writes, "A technical author is primarily a technical man and is essentially practical. Too often an applicant for the post of technical writer has only literary qualifications, they may be sufficient to ensure a euphonious, readable document but his work can never attain status as an authoritative technical record if he has only a vague knowledge of the fundamental principles upon which his account is based. In the same way an instruction to carry out a manual operation, whether skilled or semi-skilled, can only be written with confidence if the writer has actually done work of a similar nature himself. The skilled craftsman quickly picks out the weaknesses in an unsound instruction and with characteristic vehemence condemns the office people who write about things they have never seen and give instruction they would be incapable of carrying out. His views are perfectly justified, and whilst the author should endeavor to avoid his criticism, the more important thing is to foster and maintain his confidence. A poor document condemns all the others of its family — a good one gives the user faith in all matters which come from that source."

This is a British book, and expressions that are chiefly British usage, such as "whilst", and "looking out" as equivalent to "searching for", may be annoying to the American reader. But these do not seriously detract from the book's worth. Most of us will agree with his remarks on collecting information in the chapter on Copy Writing: "Now gathering information is one of the most important duties of a technical author, yet one which is little appreciated and the one which is

most difficult to assess in terms of cost and time." And later he points out one of the problems a technical writer sometimes encounters: "But it is an unfortunate fact that some technicians are loth to share their knowledge with those who have to write about their work: a few may be jealous of their achievements and feel that any records of them should be their own special prerogative, and many more think that publications will be of no personal advantage to them and that looking out information is a waste of their valuable time. The authors who produce them are a hindrance to progress! Such reticence must be overcome in a diplomatic way if the author is to gain the technicians' confidence and so win half the battle of making the work easy, accurate and adequate."

Topics treated in chapters 5 and 6 are the relationship between text and illustrations, the handling of data, graphs, diagrams, isometric, dimetric, trimetric and perspective drawings, size reduction, shading, wash drawings and color, lettering and notes, cartoons, and photographs, with numerous examples. The various techniques of reproduction, and their advantages and limitations, are presented in chapter 7; chapter 8 discusses the preparation of copy for the printer, the factors that insure good makeup and layout, the correcting of proofs, selection of paper, and the personnel who comprise a Technical Publications department in a large industrial firm. Chapter 9 is a study of publications in use with particular emphasis on aircraft publications; legal documents such as specifications, contracts and patents are the subject of chapter 10. The book is well-indexed.

Vincent J. Dowdell, Jr.

NOTE

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Positions Available

ADVERTISING AND SALES PROMOTION ENGINEER — E. E. to survey development laboratories for information to be used in company's publicity efforts. Will also be concerned with preparation of technical advertising and publicity. Young man with limited writing experience acceptable. C. J. Lahanas, General Radio Company, 275 Mass. Ave., Cambridge 39, Mass.

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Please mention the **TECHNICAL WRITING REVIEW** *when writing to Advertisers. When answering an advertisement please send all replies to the address given.*

Technical Writing Course at Tufts

Pursuing its policy of encouraging the recruiting and training of technical writers, STW is cooperating with the College of Special Studies at Tufts University in offering an evening course in Technical Writing. The instructors in the course, who include the current national president of STW and three previous presidents, present problems in the organization and presentation of technical matter, often illustrated from projects now under way in the publications groups with which they are associated. One evening will be devoted to a field trip to a Boston publications firm.

Most of the thirteen students in the course are now employed in some aspect of technical writing. The students include a professor of bio-chemistry with a German doctorate who is interested in American technical-writing practice, a Ph.D. engaged in biomechanics research who is interested in Government specifications, a young woman interested in free-lance writing, and a man who has retired after forty-four years with a public-utility company who is also interested in free-lance writing. Three members of the course are interested in formal academic credit.

Consideration is being given to repeating the course during the spring semester if sufficient interest is expressed. Additional information is available from Dr. Paul H. Flint, Tufts University, Medford, Mass.

Reducing Costs and Retaining Quality

The following open discussion was held at the October 26, 1956 meeting of the New York Chapter of the Society of Technical Writers. The panel members were Frank Miele of Illustrated Technical Products and Robert Coates of Renwar, Inc.

DEFINITION OF QUALITY. We can define quality in military technical manuals as the sum total of those factors that make a book useful to the man in the field. Certain esthetic considerations — neatness of layout, quality of retouching, etc. — also determine quality but to a lesser degree. Quality and cost tend to increase together. In this discussion, we will consider both quality and cost.

PROGRESS OF A TYPICAL JOB. This is how a job progresses through a technical writing agency. Once the contract has been awarded, a senior writer is assigned to the job. He does the more difficult portions of the writing, apportions work to writers of less experience, and directs and coordinates their work. The junior writers prepare the block diagrams, describe the simpler circuits, and prepare the tabular material. Both senor and junior writers develop the rough artwork. The Art Department produces the finished art which is then checked by the senior writer. Formerly, both the writer's manuscript and the finished art were checked by an editor for adherence to specification, for consistency, for correct grammar. The edited manuscript was then submitted to the client for his approval. Any corrections made by the client were incorporated by the writer. checked by the editor, and the book was sent to the printer. Today, the editing stage is sometimes omitted. In this discussion, we are not going to be concerned with the production of the book. We will therefore discuss the progress of the manuscript up to the moment it is submitted to a printer.

THE WRITER AND QUALITY. The quality of a book is primarily the responsibility of the writer. I should say that approximately 90% of the quality of the book is determined by the writer, while supervision accounts for no more than 10%. A good writer is expensive. However, while a book produced by an experienced writer is more expensive, it would be a better product. To produce a high-quality book, the writer needs adequate time, good physical conditions.

THE EDITOR AND QUALITY. A thoroughgoing editing will help assure that the book is complete, is grammatically correct, conforms to specification, and is cleary written. Rewrite, as distinct from editing, can be extremely valuable, particularly on a large job. The book is rewritten at the end of the job, with paragraphs rearranged for maximum clarity, new parts added, etc. Both editing and rewriting will raise the quality of a book noticeably. However, both are expensive and are often eliminated when the pressure of time and/or money begins to be felt.

QUALITY CONTROL. By quality control is meant inspection of the manuscript and art during each stage of its production. Such a program is of doubtful value because quality standards have not been clearly defined and agreed upon. A somewhat simpler system — the use of checkoff sheets to assure that all important customer requirements have been met — is widely used. It is considered an inexpensive and simple method of raising manuscript quality.

TRAINING PROGRAMS TO RAISE QUALITY. Since the writer is the principal factor in determining the quality of the finished manuscript, the suggestion naturally arises that a program to train writers should improve the quality of the manuscript. This type of training program has been attempted, but there is no agreement in the field on the merits of such a program. The two principal drawbacks to the program are: (1) the customer does not pay for the training program, hence it adds to the expense of operating the agency; (2) very often, after a writing agency has invested much time and money in training a writer, he simply moves on to a higher paying job.

SPECIALIZATION AND VOLUME TO REDUCE COSTS. The technical writing agency finds that a single $50,000 job is more profitable then ten $5,000 jobs. It is felt that a 50-man shop seems to be the most economical size. Specialization helps to reduce cost and to improve quality. Here, a group of writers would specialize in, let us say, electronic manuals. These men would then learn the specifications to be followed in writing electronic manuals and would develop proficiency in the writing techniques required. The agency sometimes finds that specialization can work to its disadvantage. For example, if an agency gets a run of electronic jobs, it may soon be in a poor competitive position to get mechanical jobs.

COST REDUCTION THROUGH CAREFUL PROGRAMMING. A major factor in the high cost of military manuals is that they must be written while the equipment is still being designed. If the book can be written after the equipment is in the field, a major reduction in cost and a major improvement in quality can be effected. This is particularly true of overhaul manuals. It is wise to assign personnel to a long job very sparingly at first, building up as the equipment design is firmed. Assigning too many people

at first will mean that the contract may run out of money before the book is finished.

MILITARY REVIEW IN RAISING QUALITY. Review of the manuscript by an experienced publications man with a good technical background can result in a vastly improved product. The background and personality of the reviewer are key factors here. The military services can help the agency cut costs by (1) indicating at the outset the type of personnel for whom the book is intended and the level to which the manual is to be written and (2) aiding the agency in interpreting the specification.

MANUFACTURER'S LIAISON AND QUALITY. This key area is often neglected in discussions of cost reduction and quality. The manufacturer's liaison can keep information flowing steadily to the writing agency, can answer questions that arise or have them answered quickly by the engineers concerned, can assure that the time spent on approval of the manuscript is minimized. On the other hand, poor liaison can be quite expensive and can lower the quality of the finished manuscript.

STW AND QUALITY. STW, by acquainting the military services and clients with the requirements of the technical writer, can improve the conditions under which technical manuals are written. Specifically, this can result in more time being allotted for the manual and more careful pre-publication planning.

SPECIFIC SUGGESTIONS. These specific suggestions were made to reduce costs without reducing quality.

(1) Use checkoff sheets to assure that all client requirements have been met.

(2) On long jobs, assign few personnel at first, building up a staff as the equipment design is finalized.

(3) Assign an experienced senior writer.

(4) If the flow of engineering data slows down, assign the writer to another project.

(5) If possible, overhaul manuals should be produced after equipment has been in the field.

(6) Attempt to get firm, complete engineering data at the outset of the job.

(7) On a long job, don't do the final art until the engineering design is finalized.

(8) Specialization — the gathering of a staff experienced in a specialty — will help cut costs.

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Oh mite most microscopic,
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That I am tempted to abet
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I don't, though, since it wouldn't get
My editor's approval.

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Program for Women Technical Writers

Officials of Simmons College in Boston, Mass. have announced the inauguration of a four-year undergraduate program in technical writing leading to the degree of Bachelor of Science. One of the foremost women's colleges in the U. S., Simmons College has earned a reputation for initiative and flexibility. Its programs are aimed to serve its students at all times as vocational trends change through industrial progress.

Simmons College authorities have for some time recognized the increasing needs in industry and Government for men and women with a solid grounding in science and technology, skill in writing and a knowledge of the techniques of publication. However, plans were not finalized until this past winter after discussion between members of the School of Publications and practicing technical writers, members of the STW Boston Chapter Education Committee. Stimulated by the interest shown by these STW members and by their promise of cooperation, college officials approved immediate action on the new program.

Still only a paper program, since its first students will not graduate until 1960, the number of inquiries — from both men and women — received since the first announcement of the program in Boston papers has indicated that its success is assured. Members of the present Freshman class, the first to be eligible to enter the program, do not choose their school of study until the end of the school year. Therefore, only then will college officials have a concrete indication of the number of students who will register for the first graduating class.

The new program fits particularly well into the Simmons College system. It makes use of both the School of Science and the School of Publications. Actually, students in the new program will be taking a double major, one in science and one in journalism.

In a preliminary step to assure future growth of the new program, plans are being made to educate secondary school students to the need for technical writers. For many years, Simmons College has published vocational guidance bulletins for use by secondary school guidance counselors. One of the new guidance bulletins to be published this year will cover the technical writing profession.

Recognizing that today's practicing technical writers require a definite combination of interests and aptitudes — sound interests in science and publishing and an aptitude for writing — the new program is being offered for those students who have parallel interests and aptitudes. The program includes a four-year study in science plus the basic required courses in the School of Publications. Programs will be available in the electric-electronic, chemical and biological fields. The typical one outlined below is for the electric-electronic field:

FIRST YEAR

No special courses are required during the Freshman year, but students planning to take this program are urged to include mathematics and/or a basic science in their schedules.

SECOND YEAR

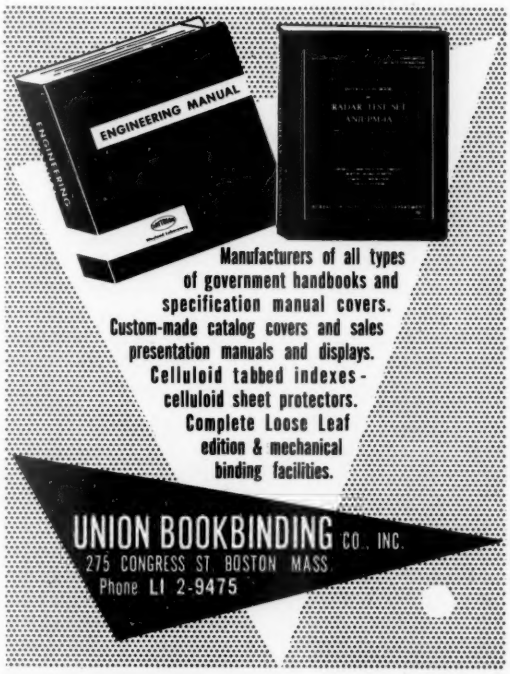
General Physics, English Literature, General Typewriting, Differential and Integral Calculus, Electives.

THIRD YEAR

Inorganic Chemistry, Electricity and Magnetism, Electronics, Journalism, Copy and Proof, Introduction to the Graphic Arts, Elective.

FOURTH YEAR

Advanced (Science) Laboratory Practice, Editing and Publishing Techniques, Layout and Design, Senior (Publications) Laboratory, Article Writing, Electives. Further details or information may be obtained from Mr. Bosworth, Simmons College, School of Publications, 300 The Fenway, Boston 15, Massachusetts.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ALCO NEWS
the Story of a House Journal

By Steven D. Smith, Mem. STW
Editor, ALCO News
Alco Products, Inc.
Schenectady, N. Y.

In January, 1950 a fledgling house journal, prepared at the Schenectady, N. Y. plant of Alco Products, Incorporated, was placed on trial. The first issue of this publication, now known as the Alco News, carried an announcement to customers that read in part as follows: ". . . we hope to further our services by keeping you constantly abreast of new developments in the fields of operation, service, maintenance, and renewal parts." Now, almost seven years later, the success of the Alco News has become one part of the story of how house journals are helping the nation's industries to serve and sell to their customers.

The objectives of the News are still much the same as they were at the outset. Thus, in a typical issue a reader might find the following: a feature story about a new Alco oil drilling rig power package; an article about a new tool for use in diesel maintenance; an announcement of a forthcoming class in the Alco School operated by the company for its customers' maintenance people; a notification about renewal parts ordering procedure. In the past year, however, articles which promote renewal parts and dispense other information to renewal parts customers have taken a larger share of space than before. The chief reason is that large scale dieselization in the railroad, marine, utility, and oil field industries has taken place since World War II. Hence, supplying renewal parts to users of diesel powered equipment has become a big, complex business requiring more and better communications between suppliers and customers. The increased attention to renewal parts in the News reflects this trend.

The problems which arise in attaining the goals of the News are the kind that present an interesting challenge to the technical writer. For example, a News writer might tend to go overboard with lengthy copy, lots of color, and a flashy assortment of illustrations. But he must reconcile this tendency with the format limitations imposed by a modest budget.

Besides keeping format in mind, the writer must remember that the News reaches people with diverse training and differing reading abilities. In the offices of an Alco customer both the purchasing agent and the mechanical superintendent are likely to be News readers. Also, the same publication is distributed to workers in the skilled trades. Electricians, machinists, and others in related jobs must be able to quickly understand copy in the News if it is to help them get the most from their Alco equipment.

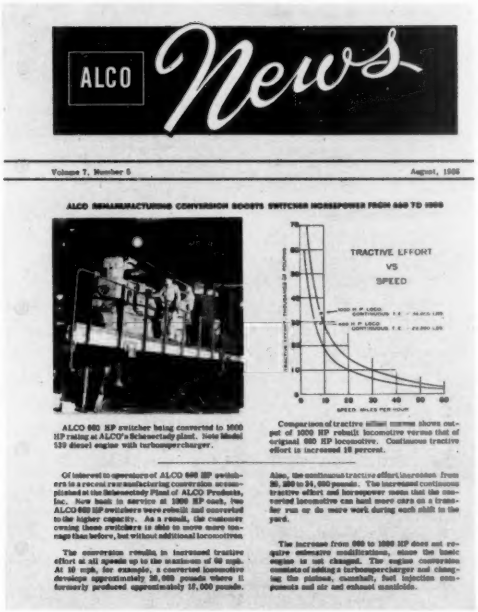
This wide readership often means that copy submitted for publication must be rewritten. A typical example is this introduction to a maintenance article submitted from an engineering group in Alco's Schenectady plant:

> "The proper procedure for tightening cylinder head studs is carefully outlined in the various instruction and maintenance manuals. In spite of these specific instructions many instances have occurred where improper tightening has resulted in extensive damage. It is believed that an explanation of the reasons for this damage from improper tightening may bring about more general adherance to the correct procedures as recommended in the Alco instructions."

The engineer who gave this article to the editor was apparently annoyed at the failure of maintenance forces to properly tighten cylinder head studs "in spite of" instructions to the contrary. His somewhat wordy prose might have concealed this meaning and no one would have been offended. But the safer course was to change the introduction so that it was more persuasive and more readable. This version appeared in the News:

> "The proper procedure for tightening cylinder head studs is carefully outlined in the various instructions and maintenance manuals. Many instances have occurred, however, where improper tightening has caused extensive damage. To help eliminate these instances, we include the following explanation of how damage results from improper tightening."

Besides adapting to the situations just described, the editor must take care of the normal business of preparing the News. Starting right after the mailing of a given issue, and sometimes even before, the editor gathers material for proposed articles in the next issue. These usually come from the marketing and engineering groups, with occasional contributions from others. After the material is gathered, it is edited so that the


ALCO News

Volume 7, Number 5 August, 1955

ALCO REMANUFACTURING CONVERSION BOOSTS SWITCHER HORSEPOWER FROM 600 TO 1000

ALCO 600 HP switcher being converted to 1000 HP rating at ALCO's Schenectady plant. Note Model 539 diesel engine with turbosupercharger.

Comparison of tractive effort curves shows output of 1000 HP rebuilt locomotive versus that of original 600 HP locomotive. Continuous tractive effort is increased 16 percent.

Of interest to operators of ALCO 600 HP switchers is a recent remanufacturing conversion accomplished at the Schenectady Plant of ALCO Products, Inc. Now back in service at 1000 HP each, two ALCO 600 HP switchers were rebuilt and converted to the higher capacity. As a result, the customers owning these switchers is able to move more tonnage than before, but without additional locomotives.

The conversion results in increased tractive effort at all speeds up to the maximum of 60 mph. At 10 mph, for example, a converted locomotive develops approximately 58,000 pounds where it formerly produced approximately 50,000 pounds.

Also, the continuous tractive effort increases from 30,250 to 34,000 pounds. The increased continuous tractive effort and horsepower means that the converted locomotive can haul more cars on a tonnage run or do more work during each shift in the yard.

The increase from 600 to 1000 HP does not require extensive modifications, since the basic engine is not changed. The engine conversion consists of adding a turbosupercharger and changing the pistons, camshaft, fuel injection components and air and exhaust manifolds.

total number of words will, with proposed illustrations, approximately fill the forthcoming issue. All edited copy is then typed up for office duplication and copies are distributed to the members of the Alco News Committee. Representatives from interested groups in the Alco organization make up the Committee and meet to discuss the proposed articles.

Once the copy has Committee approval it is given any minor editing still required. Then the final job of copyfitting begins. The details of the latter job are of course affected by the format, which in the case of the News is variable. Ordinarily the News appears on both sides of an 11″ x 8½″ sheet, but it has sometimes appeared on four pages of this size. The two-page length permits space for 218 lines of copy if no illustrations are used. However, almost every issue has at least one halftone or linecut and sometimes there are several. Final copy appears in two-column form, the columns being approximately 49 characters wide. This last figure varies slightly because the copy is prepared for the printer on IBM "Executive" typewriters and some typists seem to get in a few more characters per column than others. Typed copy is pasted on cardboard for the camera and sent to the printer with any photographs or tracings for the final step, which in this case is photo-offset printing in two colors.

If all goes according to schedule, the News is published and mailed so as to reach its readers by the first of every other month. There is no hard and fast rule about the publishing date because issues sometimes need to be delayed to include important new developments regarding products and policies.

Alco's experience is that the results the News has achieved are worth the expense of publication. The Alco Renewal Parts Department had an interesting experience recently which bears this out. A new design for one of the replaceable parts on the Alco Model 244 diesel engine had been on the market for two months. Customer orders for the part, however, were still almost one hundred percent for the former design. After the new design was featured in the News, orders for it began to pick up, and before the next issue the proportion of orders for the new design had jumped from almost zero to eighty percent.

One of many demonstrations of News reader retention came about when a representative of a large eastern railroad visited Alco's Schenectady offices. He impressed Alco personnel by referring from memory in considerable detail about an article on fuel injection equipment that had appeared several months previous.

The results that the News achieves are not all external ones. Alco sales representatives find it impossible to mention all of the company's many products upon each visit to a customer, and have expressed their appreciation for the coverage in the News that various items have received. The home renewal parts office cooperates with field forces in this matter by sending out advance copies of the material to appear in the next issue. In this way the sales representatives are able to have the desired information ready when customer inquiries are received.

In the years since 1950 the Alco News has established itself as a valuable means of communicating with customers. By giving the latest information on various products that Alco manufactures and the best ways to keep these products functioning, the News performs a valuable service to its customer readers and to its company. It is an example of the commercial house journal in action, and represents one of the many ways in which technical writing serves modern industry.

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Chapter News

Cincinnati

The first organizational meeting of the future Cincinnati Chapter of STW was held in Cincinnati, Ohio, on September 28. Approximately sixty technical writers and editors from technical writing departments in the area attended this dinner meeting. As evidenced by the impressive amount of interest shown at this first regular meeting, a large, active chapter is expected to form.

Both the historical background and the philosophy of STW were explained to the group after the dinner. By-laws, based on those in use by other STW chapters, were read and approved. A discussion on the proposed STW-TWE merger was also held. This was followed by a short talk by James J. Bourcher, Chief, Information Branch, Technical Information and Intelligence Division, Wright Air Development Center, Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio.

The following officers and executive board members were elected to guide the group until a charter is received from the national headquarters of STW:

President — Ken Yarber
Vice-President — Robert L. Wadland
Executive Secretary — Don Corlett
Treasurer — Doris Faulkner
Executive Board Members —
Charles Gutzwiller
Joe Bachsman, Jr.
William C. Kavel

Albuquerque

The meeting of the Albuquerque Chapter was held September 17 in the Staff Room of the Coronado Club. Thirty-two people were present.

After introductory remarks by President Earle George and Max Weber, chairman of the Program Committee, E. E. Jones spoke on "Application of the Graphic Arts to Technical Writing." Mr. Jones provided interesting facts about the printing industry and some anecdotes about map-making, in which he was engaged, during World War II. A question and answer period followed. Coffee and rolls were served.

A short business meeting followed the guest speaker. The Treasurer's report showed a balance of $91.10 after payment of $3.75 to the New Mexico Council of Scientific and Technical Societies. The Program Committee chairman announced that Dr. Norton B. Kroll, Assistant Professor of English at the University of New Mexico would talk at the October meeting on the subject "Why Technical Writing?" and that Mr. Lee Parman, Supervisor of the Reports Section of the Technical Information Division of Sandia Corporation would speak in November on "A Practical Brief Course in Technical Writing for Industry".

Connecticut

A meeting of the Connecticut Chapter, held September 25, was addressed by Dr. Frank Achard, National Secretary-Treasurer of STW. He discussed the collection of data and the development of text in the preparation of instruction manuals.

Scheduled for the November 29 meeting was a talk by Ellsworth Geist of S. D. Warren Company, paper manufacturers, covering the fundamentals that produce destructions among grades of papers and the limitations of the various papers.

Chicago

In an important step on the practical side of the proposed STW-TWE merger, the Chicago Chapter of STW held a joint meeting with the Chicago Chapter of TWE on October 3. Speakers at this meeting were Mrs. J. Elizabeth Thorson, Assistant to the Manager, Physics Research, Armour Research Foundation, and Bonnell H. Allen, Manager, Chicago Office, Engineering Societies Placement Service.

Mrs. Thorson spoke on "Preparing for Your Technical Writing, Editing, and Communications Career." She drew from her background as a teacher of report writing to college undergraduate engineering students and as a practicing technical editor on ARF reports to illustrate and expand her discussion.

The subject of Mr. Allen's talk was "Employment Opportunities in the Technical Writing and Editing Fields." He discussed some of the classifications of technical writers and editors which are a result of job enquiries by prospective employers and of file histories. Mr. Allen also covered the type of backgrounds required for these classifications and the salary ranges which accompany the various skill levels. His talk is published elsewhere in this issue.

Mohawk

Mohawk Chapter members, tanned and rested (?) after their summer vacations, are resuming Society activity with election of officers for the 1956-57 year. Ballots, mailed to each member, carried names of candidates active in Industry and Education. Returns were incomplete at press time for this issue of the TECHNICAL WRITING REVIEW.

The new officers will be installed at this season's first Chapter meeting to be held in October. The Program Committee is arranging for a speaker who is associated specifically with the field of technical writing.

The Chapter is receiving requests for information from numerous individuals. It is expected that several of these requests will result in the addition to the Chapter of new qualified members. A membership drive is being planned for the near future.

Boston

A panel discussion on "When Does a Technical Writer Become a Technical Editor?" was the principal feature of the September meeting of the Boston Chapter. The history of STW was outlined by Chapter President John V. E. Hansen. Mr. Hansen and Sydney F. Shapiro, STW members of the Joint Constitutional Committee, reported on the proposed STW-TWE merger — "We hope to resolve remaining points of dispute at future meetings of the committees of the two organizations. Agreements have already been reached on many basic issues." Past National President Ronald D. Eames reported on plans for the joint convention of STW and TWE.

The panel discussion developed some interesting agreements and disputes and produced the following definitive points regarding the two classifications:

The Technical Writer	The Technical Editor
— writes	— coordinates — may combine efforts of several writers has the overall view
— creates	— also creates
— may have to be an editor as well in some types of work	— maintains consumer liaison
— should have or get familiarity with subject	— has objective view and fresh unbiased attitude
— gathers information	— need not have as much familiarity with subject as writer

"The Hatching and Early Development of Potential Technical Writers in the College Classroom" was the title of a talk by Dr. Paul H. Flint at the October meeting. Dr. Flint, Assistant Dean of the Graduate School at Tufts University and Past National President of STW, discussed the problems of educating candidates for the technical writing profession.

Reports on organization, progress and plans of committees were presented by Chairmen or Executive Board Members of the Education, Membership, Terminology, Bibliography and Readability Committees. Coffee and doughnuts were served during the informal discussion and get-acquainted period that concluded the evening.

Dr. Flint pointed out that an engineer with the responsibility for writing and supervisory work "can get someone to insert commas and semicolons right-side-up" but he cannot allocate to someone else the organization of his work. Therefore, he said, it is essential to teach this organization to those who will be concerned with technical publications. He described two basic considerations of work organization:

1. The practical approach to technical writing:
   a. Functional analysis — the middle of the road between abstraction and ultra-simple fact.
   b. Coordination or subordination with some system.
   c. Recognition that ignorance rather than stupidity is the cause for one person not knowing the same things as another person.
2. The romance of technical writing:
   a. Technological training.
   b. Language skills — seeking to make the individual comparatively independent of the dictionary.
   c. Production skill — e. g., knowledge of printing processes.

New York

An account of the panel discussion at the October 26 meeting of the New York Chapter appears elsewhere in this issue.

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STW-TWE Convention News

An approximate total of 650 people from all parts of the United States and Canada attended the Joint Society of Technical Writers-Association of Technical Writers and Editors Convention at the Hotel Statler in New York City on November 15 and 16. Basic themes of the Convention were the improvement of technical writing performance, producing and organizing technical literature, solving specific publications problems, and being specific in industrial and government technical writing. The speakers discussed new methods of achieving these aims and solving common problems.

Among the excellent speakers were Brig. Gen. Dale O. Smith, USAF, The Pentagon; Mr. E. S. Lee, Editor, G-E REVIEW; Prof. Christian K. Arnold, Pennsylvania State University; Mr. Dwayne Orton, Editor, THINK, International Business Machines Corporation; Mr. William H. Poellinger, Glenn L. Martin Company; and Mr. Mel W. Thistle, National Research Laboratory, Ottawa, Canada.

Plans are already underway for the 1957 Convention to be held in New York City on approximately the same Thursday and Friday in November as was this year's Convention.

STW-TWE Merger News

One of the highlights of the Joint STW-TWE Convention was the announcement by Mr. Robert Shnitzler, President of STW, and Mr. Richard Frehsee, President of TWE, that a basic agreement leading toward a merger of the two organizations had been reached. This agreement concerned the qualifications for full voting membership and the principal grades of voting membership.

The proposed full voting membership will be extended to "persons having a major concern with technical writing or editing, or with publication of technical material, or with related activities (such as: scientific research, illustration, translating, or technical advertising) or who have been so engaged". The six proposed grades of membership are: Fellow (voting), Senior Member (voting), Member (voting), Affiliate Member, Student Member and Sustaining Member.

Urged on by the success of the STW-TWE merger discussions, plans have been made for a December meeting of representatives of STW, TWE and TPS (Technical Publishing Society of Los Angeles). Mr. Edward Stearns, President of TPS, attended the Convention and some of the merger discussions. He stated that it would be logical for TPS to merge with the new STW-TWE organization.

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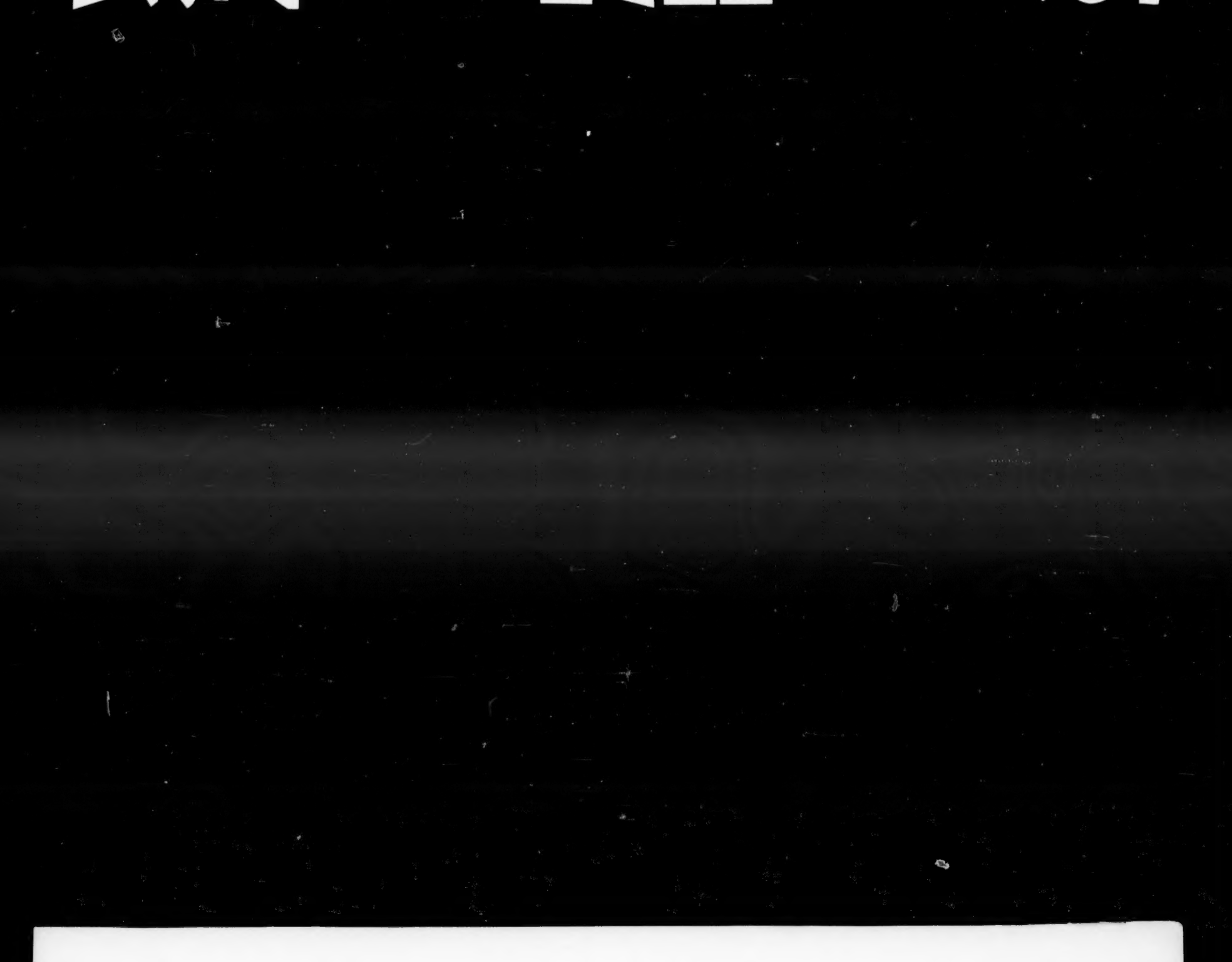
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